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Kennedy and the Revision of History

In last week's flickering flashbacks, we heard all over again that John F. Kennedy was witty, wicked, wise and ill-advised. Nothing beautiful or bad was left unsaid. And, yet, somehow nothing seemed to be settled.

It was as if after a quarter of a century the brutal, abrupt ending of the Kennedy presidency is still not accepted. Its historical significance, accordingly, is still not understood. Why this insistence on trying to give ever deeper sociological, political and historical meaning—well beyond what available evidence will sustain—to this one violent, hateful act? Why, indeed, do we celebrate the birth of two slain heroes, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, while commemorating the anniversary of the slaying of Kennedy?

Much of it, I think, has to do with what has befallen us since 1963 and with our freedom to wallow in contemplation of the alternatives history so conveniently cannot disclose. What if, we ask ourselves, Kennedy had served out two terms? Would we now be wringing our hands over an "America in decline?"

With no way of knowing, there's no harm in wistful conjecture—up to a point. But when it hardens into revisionist history, it badly serves not only the memory of John F. Kennedy, but our understanding of ourselves and of the assorted misadventures of the past tumultuous 25 years.

Surely something of consequence was lost in Dallas—a political golden age, for many, if not exactly a Camelot. But it was not the great historical "turning point" in the sense that many would have us believe. Kennedy's death, a single "random

event," did not "prove" that "a world we once thought manageable cannot be brought to order," as columnist Richard Cohen seemed to be arguing the other day—surely not when you think of what we were later put through: the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and Lyndon Johnson's despairing of his own Vietnam strategy, all in 1968; Nixon driven from office in disgrace in 1974; the final Vietnam ignominy in 1975; America held hostage in 1979.

Still less can it be said that Kennedy, as Cohen puts it, "personified a self-deluded and self-intoxicated America." Or that one rhetorical flourish ("pay any price") in his inaugural address "could only resonate in a country that felt it was master of its fate."

To believe all that, you have to presume that Kennedy believed it. That means not hearing the rest of the inaugural address with its grim summons to "a long twilight struggle" in defense of freedom "in its hour of maximum danger." You have to forget how little mastery Kennedy had of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in the early months of his presidency and also his later powerlessness to do more than hurl eloquent words at the Berlin Wall. You have to forget, as well, the sober restraint in what was to become by mid-1963 the dominant theme of his foreign policy: a world to be made safe not for freedom or democracy but for "diversity." Not to nit-pick, but Kennedy did not see the Peace Corps as "bright and idealistic Dale Carnegies," setting out to "win friends and influence people in the Third World," as Cohen seems to see it. Kennedy saw it as a modest effort to teach simple things to simple

people largely unreached by massive conventional U.S. economic and military aid.

Again not to quibble, Kennedy did not think the Green Berets by themselves could "set things right in Vietnam." On the contrary he said in September 1963 that "in the final analysis it is their war. . . . We can send our men out there to advise them, but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam." More than once, he rejected recommendations from trusted advisers to commit organized U.S. combat forces to the war.

What Kennedy would have done about Vietnam is unknowable. What we know is that in the year after his death, Congress rushed through, with only two dissenting Senate votes, a Tonkin Gulf Resolution that Lyndon Johnson later used as a blank check to expand our Vietnam involvement beyond Kennedy's wildest imaginings. Years later it was hardly noticed at first when Ronald Reagan led us into another quagmire in Lebanon. If you doubt our continuing capacity for self-intoxication, consider the chest-thumping, flag-waving popular response to the Libyan raid and the assault on Grenada, and the absence of any public clamor for serious debate in last fall's campaign on the budgetary crisis.

If American was "self-deluded" in the Kennedy years, in short, it was not of Kennedy's doing—and it did not end in Dallas. Far from exemplifying a nation that thought itself "master of its fate," Kennedy had come painfully to realize by November 1963 what Cohen suggests we have only lately come to realize—that "our reach has exceeded our grasp."